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# Thicker Than Water

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## THICKER THAN WATER

Elizabeth Mazzola

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*Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* by Ariane M. Balizet. New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp. 198. \$148.00 cloth, \$54.95 eBook.

Ariane M. Balizet's new study, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama*, is a rich, valuable exploration of the ways early modern drama uses blood in its projects to delineate domestic space. Signaling the home as a setting at once familiar and violent, structured and reified by betrayals, battles, wounds and scars, blood is "a 'compulsory' means of dramatic expression in the drama of this period," "essential," Balizet claims, to many theatrical narratives, at once providing "an unwieldy stage effect and a tangle of . . . assumptions about bodies, families, nations, religion, and violence" (2–3). "The shock of viewing blood outside the body," Balizet proposes, "corresponds to the theatrical thrill of peeking into the homes of strangers" (138). Balizet's work productively draws on earlier studies of household space by Wendy Wall, Frances Dolan, Gail Kern Paster, and Lena Cowen Orlin, but Balizet's point is that early modern homes and families were organized by rituals involving the shedding of blood (like childbirth, menstruation, and intercourse, as well as the bloodletting that early modern medicine prescribed), rituals that also endangered the members of the household space. Close readings of a range of plays help Balizet make her case and support the important insight that "the qualities of the domestic shape individuals outside the home" since blood marks this world and makes it visible (6–7; see

also 71). This learned and highly readable account of the Protestant theater in early modern England also makes a substantial case for the ways such texts reveal anxieties about the changing dimensions of domesticity, nationhood, patriarchal authority, and religion. The materials here are fascinating, and the author's guidance assured throughout.

There are four chapters and an afterword. Each chapter centers on a crisis in which a connection to the home is challenged, emblemized in turn by the figure of the bleeding bride, the bleeding husband, the bleeding child, and the bleeding patient. Balizet's afterword considers representations of domestic violence in contemporary media, suggesting how the anxieties she traces in earlier texts continue to trouble families and inform entertainments today. A discussion of the mock weddings in both William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603–4) and *As You Like It* (1599) in chapter 1 is extraordinarily inventive and persuasive, examining how the uncertainty surrounding marriage pacts after the Reformation could violently threaten male identity and male bonds. Particularly compelling and original is Balizet's analysis of the ways the Protestant "replacement of [marital] consummation with solemnization" rendered marriage "now bloodless" (30). Desdemona's unstained wedding sheets are thus

evidence, she argues, of "an aborted domestic unit" (40). Chapter 2 centers upon the cuckolded husbands in Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd's *Arden of Faversham* (1592) and George Sanders's *A Warning for Fair Women* (1573), figures whose blood "is an index" of their "powerlessness" (54). The patriarch's weakness or vulnerability is explained, Balizet suggests here, by "two importantly divergent models of authority" operating at this time, one imagining the housewife as presiding over the household, the other locating in the husband an image of the king (59). Taking up Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1582–92) and Shakespeare's *Henry VI* (1591) and *Titus Andronicus* (1591–92) to consider the bleeding child, chapter 3 investigates how the sight of a son's blood reassures the grieving father of his paternity, whereas a daughter's blood instead establishes her sexual honor. In some ways, chapter 4 is the most ambitious. Balizet focuses on John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1611) and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–13) alongside dramatic literature of the Spanish Golden Age (with its emphasis on *limpieza de sangre*, or family honor) to argue that the Spanish plays reflect Catholic ideas about bloodshed as *sacramental* and sacrificial, whereas English plays view blood as *symbolic*, construing the shedding of blood as restorative or recuperative.

Repeatedly in *Blood and Home* Balizet emphasizes how male identity was particularly destabilized in this period because of the shifting contours of the state and domestic space; Balizet traces the conflicting symbolism of the bloodstained handkerchief operating in many of these works as an index of how uneasily patriarchal authority held sway. The surprisingly less common sight of female blood being shed on stage similarly allowed for the consolidation of the powers of fathers and husbands, Balizet argues, although I continue to wonder whether the equally red blood of mothers and witches, along with that of female heretics and traitors and criminals, might also help us see early modern women as occasionally operating far beyond patriarchal constraints.

There are many striking and original insights here, chief among them the claim that domestic identity is important because it is portable (91). But this is the case because blood is something shared, not only spilled or shed. If Lady Macbeth says she would dash out the brains of the infant she suckles (her murder of the baby a violation of maternal love but also a repudiation of the father's bloodline), she hesitates to murder King Duncan because he resembles her sleeping father: the blood *she and this father share* is still forceful, even as a memory, and its powers exculpatory—maybe even as vast as the “multitudinous

seas” turned red by Macbeth's crimes (2.2.60). Unlike tears or breast milk, blood flows without always leaking. Lady Macbeth is an ironic source for these reminders; planning to murder her king, she describes not the spilling of his blood but the containment of hers: “Make thick my blood,/Stop up th'access and passage to remorse” (1.5.41–42). When she does register remorse in act 5, she is again struck by the fact of blood as something sealed within the body, having volume, taking up space: “[W]ho would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1.33–34) she wonders, reducing Duncan's body to a container for this vital, voluminous force.

One can argue that the many correspondences Balizet draws between household and state—indicated, she argues, by the way authorities severely punished the wives and lovers who murdered cuckolded husbands—not only establish an analogical relation, but also point to deeper, more formative links, something Balizet implies when she comments that “blood provided a common vocabulary for . . . structures of kinship, status, and national identity” (3). Perhaps the early modern household and the state did not *share ideas* about blood as much as *share blood*, a linkage illustrated for us when Shakespeare's Duchess of Gloucester reminds Gaunt of the demands of brotherhood:

“Edward’s seven sons, whereof  
 thyself art one,/Were as seven vials  
 of his sacred blood,/Or seven fair  
 branches springing from one root”  
 (*Richard II* [1595] 1.2.11–12). Blood  
 is also important, so the Duchess  
 argues, when it courses through  
 living veins. Hamlet’s father’s  
 account of his murder employs the  
 same imagery of blood as some-  
 thing internal and active when  
 he describes Claudius’s poison  
 as a “leperous distilment, whose  
 effect/Holds such an enmity” with  
 “the thin and wholesome” “blood  
 of man” (1.5.64–65, 70). Such issues

are worth pursuing in more detail,  
 and *Blood and Home* is clearly a  
 valuable introduction to them.  
 Balizet’s book will also be of inter-  
 est to scholars of early modern cul-  
 ture, the history of domestic spaces,  
 and the strategies employed by  
 Protestant theater to deal with the  
 loss of Catholic ideas about blood’s  
 sacred powers.

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 new book Women and Mobility on  
 Shakespeare’s Stage was published by  
 Routledge in 2017.*